

Cassandra

Cassandre

Cassandra

Véronique Léonard-Roques

Translator: Sarah Voke



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/1260>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.1260

ISSN: 2506-6390

Publisher:

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2014

Number of pages: 186-187

ISBN: 978-2-84174-674-3

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

Véronique Léonard-Roques, « Cassandra », *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 118 | 2014, Online since 01 October 2015, connection on 23 October 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/1260> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.1260>

Woordenboek over getuigenis en herinnering



WORDS OF TESTIMONY AND OF MEMORY

Because researchers, professors and professionals working in the arts, culture or news are more and more often needing to use words from the fields of testimony and of memory, *Testimony between history and memory* has set itself the objective of gathering them into a dictionary, thus opening up this experimental space. One word can take on different meanings depending on the language it is used or circulates in. This is why certain terms of the dictionary will be approached in a multilingualistic, or even in a multicultural way.

This project will be realized in two stages. Each term from an index in progress will be presented twice. First in the form of short notices in each edition of the review, then inviting developments and a critical debate, with multiple voices, on a website that will start running from the Autumn 2014. We will associate to their short version, voluntarily incomplete, a few book titles, however not claiming to be exhaustive.

CASSANDRA

Cassandra, daughter of king Priam, briefly appears in Homer's *Iliad*. From atop the high walls of Troy, she shouts to her compatriots to call them to express their grief after Hector returns dead. Her tragic and lyrical potential is developed later, in the tragedies. As a prophet inspired by Apollo (from the *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus) and through the good use of her reason (in many modern versions), she becomes a figure of inaudible knowledge. Though no one believes her, she announces the eradication of her city and the horrors of the war. A slave deported to Mycenae and the last witness of the disaster, she embodies the fall of Troy through the reversal of her situation, her solitude and her tragic end (she is killed by Clytemnestra). Ahead of her time, her position as a visionary allows her even to bear witness to a past that is not personal to her. Indeed, in the tradition of Aeschylus, she recalls the crimes buried at the origin of the curse of the Atreids by Clytemnestra and the matricide by Orestes once again make new. Underlining how "the prediction of the future is inseparable from the past, so of memory" (Romain

Racine), Cassandra is a figure of words that resist being forgotten.

From Aeschylus to Christa Wolf, she functions in the face of official History as a figure haunted by the transmission of the memory of the defeated. It is particularly in the light of the question of testimony that the foreigner, the "barbarian", measures the so called "civilisation" of the winners. With Aeschylus, in the guise of a gift of hospitality, Cassandra asks the chorus to transmit her memory, which no one will do in the rest of the play or the trilogy. "The Trojan poet is dead... The word belongs to the Greek poet", Giraudoux's protagonist declares in the final line of *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*. In the face of the epic tradition that is an authority among the literary canon (the "river of epic poems"), Wolf aims to make the point of view of the defeated be heard in a narrative ("this tiny stream") that distinguishes itself from institutionalised genres, desecrates heroic values and of which Cassandra, having become an eponymous heroine, is the narrator.

The identity of this figure, her own mythological agenda, refers to some of the very properties of the myth, a profoundly memorial matter in its own right. As an "inven-



tive memory" (Marcel Detienne), a myth merely exists through its reception, offering a collective symbolizing tool particularly apt to bear witness to violence.

Véronique Léonard-Roques

University Blaise Pascal – CELIS EA 1002.
Clermont-Ferrand

(Translation: Sarah Voke)

Goudot, Marie (ed.), *Cassandra*, Paris: Autrement, 1999.

Léonard-Roques, Véronique & Philippe Mesnard (eds.), *Cassandra, figure du témoignage et de transmission mémorielle*, Paris: Kimé. Expected publication date: 2015.

Racine, Romain, 'Cassandra', in Pierre Brunel (ed.), *Dictionnaire des mythes féminins*, Monaco: Rocher, 2002.

Schérer, René, *Zeus hospitalier. Éloge de l'hospitalité*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1993.

Wolf, Christa, *Cassandra*, Trans. Jan van Heurck. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984.

THE GREY ZONE

The multilingualistic and multicultural approach of the Dictionary is here illustrated by the second occurrence of "The grey zone", after Frediano Sessi's paper on "La zone grise" in n°117.

The "grey zone" is a term coined by the Italian Holocaust survivor Primo Levi in his essay collection *The Drowned and the Saved*, the last book he completed before his death. In "The Grey Zone", the second chapter and the longest essay in the book, Levi acknowledges the human need to divide the social field into "us" and "them", two clearly distinct and identifiable groups, but points out that such binary thinking is inadequate in the face of the complexity of life in the camps. "[T]he network of human relationships inside the Lagers was not simple", he writes: "it could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors" (23). A key facet of Nazi practice, after all, was to attempt to turn

victims into accomplices. Setting out to explore "the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors" (25), insight into which he considers to be of fundamental importance, Levi emphasizes that he by no means intends to obliterate the distinction between these two categories: "to confuse [the murderers] with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is a precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth" (33).

The grey zone is inhabited mostly by victims who compromise and collaborate with their oppressors to varying degrees and with varying degrees of freedom of choice in exchange for preferential treatment. Levi insists that one should refrain from passing easy judgment on these morally ambiguous privileged prisoners, who found themselves flung into an infernal environment and who, moreover, did not constitute a monolithic group but came in many different shades of grey, with different levels of culpability. The examples he considers include low-ranking functionaries carrying out routine duties such as bed smoothing and lice checking, the *Kapos* of the work squads, the barracks chiefs, the clerks, and those prisoners who performed diverse duties in the camps' administrative offices, the Political Section, the Labour Service, and the punishment cells. He devotes particular attention to the *Sonderkommandos* or "special squads", the groups of prisoners entrusted with the running of the crematoria, whom one would hesitate to call privileged. According to Levi, no one is

authorized to judge these individuals, who represent “[a]n extreme case of collaboration” (34). Judgment must also be suspended, he argues, in the perplexing case of Chaim Rumkowski, the controversial head of the Jewish council in the Lodz ghetto, another exemplary occupant of the grey zone whose story Levi discusses at some length. While Levi primarily focuses on privileged Jewish prisoners in the camps and ghettos, his conceptualization of the grey zone stretches to include collaborationist regimes such as those of Vichy France and Quisling in Norway and even a sadistic SS man who briefly contemplated sparing a young girl taken alive from the gas chamber. It is a reflection, ultimately, on the ambiguity of human nature in general, and has been appropriated in many different contexts, fields, and disciplines, ranging from Holocaust studies to philosophy, theology, law, feminism, and popular culture. ■

Stef Craps
Ghent University

◆ Levi, Primo, ‘The Grey Zone’, in *Id.*, *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated from the Italian by Raymond Rosenthal, London: Abacus, 1986/1989, 22-51.

MEMORIALIST

The memorialist bears witness to his memory. It is expected of him that he shares an exemplary experience of contemporary history, an exemplarity that his voice constructs in the representation of the relation between the particularity of an individual existence and the generality of collective history. It is a

usual condition of the memorialist’s writing that he lived his own day in a remarkable way either as a witness or as an actor in decisive events, however not necessarily. The exemplarity of his experiences is worked into a narrative that illustrates the problem of the relation of an individual to a group. The memorialist does not appear alone, but connected to his contemporaries; he thinks about the aspects that have set the dominant traits of his generation and to the way he embodied them himself. His approach to writing finds itself at the intercross between collective and individual narratives, discovering the solidarity between both. In this perspective, he could wish not to dwell on the private aspects of his existence (family and sentimental relationships, deeply personal).

Ever since Memoirs have been considered as a writing form (in France, during the 12th century), both modes of relating to history have taken on appearances. We can namely mention the cardinal de Retz and the Duke of Saint-Simon, the two most well-known memorialists of the Ancien Régime. The first one participated in and gave an account of his first-hand experience of the events of the Fronde; the second was a witness and minute observer of the habits and customs of Louis XIV’s court. After the revolution, after Rousseau as well, the memorialist’s testimony progressively gained freedom. It is as much as an actor than as a witness of history, by showing the public scene than by showing what is deeply personal, to write history than to illustrate literature, that Chateaubriand writes the Memoirs that make him a memorialist of



reference within French tradition. Since then, historical testimonies no longer have a prescribed composition. History, spelt with a capital H and reminding of the “hatchet” (Perec) that it waved during the entire 20th century, has finished sweeping the divisions we had for a long time held onto, by shifting the relations of the individual to the group. Each memorialist shows these relations as a new experience for which the exemplary narrative is yet to be reinvented. ■

Damien Zanone
Université catholique de Louvain,
Louvain-la-Neuve
(Translation: Sarah Voke)

◆ Jeannelle, Jean-Louis, *Écrire ses mémoires au XX^e siècle. Déclin et renouveau*, Paris: Gallimard, 2008.

◆ Jeannelle, Jean-Louis, Marc Hersant & Damien Zanone (eds.), ‘Le Sens du passé. Pour une nouvelle approche des Mémoires’, *La Licorne. Revue de langue et de littérature françaises de l’Université de Poitiers* 104, 2013.

◆ Zanone, Damien, *Écrire son temps. Les Mémoires en France de 1815 à 1848*, Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2006.

POSTMEMORY

‘Postmemory’ beschrijft de relatie van de ‘volgende generatie’ tot het persoonlijke, collectieve en culturele trauma van de vorige generatie – ervaringen die zij zich enkel kunnen ‘herinneren’ via de verhalen, beelden en praktijken waarmee ze zijn opgegroeid. De overleving van deze ervaringen verliep echter op zo’n intense en emotionele manier, dat het *lijkt* alsof het werkelijk herinneringen zijn. Het verband tussen postmemory en het verleden komt in feite niet voort uit de herinnering, maar is het resultaat van verbeelding, projectie en creatie. Wanneer we verpletterende herinneringen erven en opgroeien tussen verhalen die voorafgaan aan onze geboorte of ons bewustzijn, bestaat de kans dat ons eigen levensverhaal wordt overschaduwd, of zelfs volledig verdrongen, door dat van onze voorouders. Dat betekent dat ons leven, al is het onrechtstreeks, wordt beheerst door traumatische fragmenten van gebeurtenissen die nog steeds elke narratieve reconstructie tarten en elk begrip te boven gaan. Die gebeurtenissen mogen dan in het verleden liggen, ze werken door in het heden. Dit is, naar mijn aanvoelen, de structuur van postmemory en het proces dat de generatie ervan kenmerkt.

Postmemory is geen basis om een bepaalde *identiteit* te claimen, maar verwijst naar een *generatieve* vorm van overdracht en naar de verschillende manieren waarop die tot stand kan komen. Zelfs in haar meest intieme momenten is het gezinsleven verankerd in een collectieve verbeelding. Die verbeelding bestaat uit imaginaire

structuren en projecties eigen aan een generatie, en is ingebed in een bestaand archief aan verhalen en beelden, waardoor individuele en familiale herinneringen vervalmeend en gedeeld kunnen worden. Dan rest de vraag: kunnen we de traumatische ervaringen van anderen *overnemen* als ervaringen *die de onze hadden kunnen zijn*, en de gebeurtenissen integreren in ons eigen levensverhaal, zonder ze te imiteren of onrechtmatig toe te eigenen?

Die vraag heeft niet alleen betrekking op het proces van identificatie, verbeeldingen en projectie dat we vaststellen bij hen die opgroeiden in een gezin van overlevenden, maar ook bij hen die als minder nauw verwante leden van een generatie of relationeel netwerk een traumatische erfenis delen – en dus ook de nieuwsgierigheid, de drang, de frustrerende *noodzaak* voelen om het traumatische verleden te kennen. Het gaat hier echter om twee soorten processen. Ik zou daarom een onderscheid willen maken tussen *familiale* en *geaffilieerde* postmemory, waarbij ik me baseer op het verschil tussen, enerzijds, een *intergenerationele* verticale identificatie tussen kind en ouder binnen een gezin, en anderzijds de *intragenerationele* horizontale identificatie onder tijdgenoten, die kan voortvloeien uit de extrapolatie van het standpunt van dat kind. Geaffilieerde postmemory ontstaat onder tijdgenoten die een connectie hebben met de tweede generatie. Het trauma wordt doorgegeven via structuren die toegankelijk en kneedbaar zijn, en uiteraard overtuigend genoeg zijn om een grotere gemeenschap te kunnen opnemen in een organisch web van herinneringsoverdracht.

De ‘post’ in ‘postmemory’ houdt meer in dan alleen een vertraging in de tijd, meer dan een situering in de nasleep van de dingen. Ik wil me niet inschrijven in een lineaire, temporele of sequentiële logica. Denk aan de vele ‘posts’ die nog steeds een belangrijke plaats innemen in het huidige intellectuele landschap. ‘Postmodernisme’ en ‘poststructuralisme’, om te beginnen, veronderstellen tegelijkertijd een kritische afstand en een nauwe band met modernisme en structuralisme; ‘postkolonialisme’ betekent niet het einde van het kolonialisme maar diens verontrustende voortzetting, terwijl ‘postfeminisme’ juist werd gebruikt om het vervolg op feminisme aan te duiden. Het lijkt geen twijfel dat we ons nog steeds in een tijdperk van ‘posts’ bevinden die – ten goede of ten kwade – welig blijven tieren: ‘posttraumatisch’, natuurlijk, maar ook ‘postsecularisme’, ‘posthumanisme’, ‘postkolonie’, ‘postraciaal’. Rosalind Morris opperde onlangs dat de ‘post’ werkt zoals een Post-it: het element hecht zich aan de oppervlakte van teksten en concepten, voegt er iets aan toe en transformeert ze in de vorm van een Derridaans ‘supplement’. Wel komen de ideeën op de Post-its makkelijk los en verliezen ze zo hun connectie met het bronmateriaal. Als een Post-it afvalt, moet het postconcept zelfstandig doorgaan, en kan het in die precaire positie eigen kenmerken ontwikkelen.

‘Postmemory’ kent de gelaagdheid en vertraging van de andere ‘posts’, en berust als praktijk op het citaat en het supplement. Net als de andere ‘posts’ zoekt ‘postmemory’ het ongemakkelijke evenwicht op tussen continuïteit

en ruptuur. Toch is postmemory geen beweging, methode of idee; ik zie het veeleer als een *structuur* van inter- en transgeneratieve terugkeer van traumatische kennis en belichaamde ervaring. Het is een gevolg van traumatische herinnering dat zich manifesteert met een generatie vertraging, in tegenstelling tot een posttraumatische stressstoornis.

Ik besef dat mijn omschrijving van deze structuur van inter- en transgeneratieve trauma-overdracht evenveel vragen oproept als beantwoordt. Waarom vasthouden aan de term ‘herinnering’, *memory*, om deze transacties te definiëren? Als postmemory niet beperkt blijft tot de intieme familiale ruimte waar de herinnering werkelijk wordt belichaamd, via welke mechanismen kunnen we die ruimte dan openbreken om ook minder nauw verwante, adoptieve getuigen of *geaffilierte* tijdgenoten bij het proces te betrekken? Waarom is postmemory eigen aan traumatische herinneringen? Kunnen positieve gebeurtenissen of andere ingrijpende historische momenten dan niet met eenzelfde ambivalente intensiteit doorgegeven worden van de ene generatie op de andere? Welke esthetische en institutionele structuren, welke tropen en technieken geven het best de psychologie van postmemory weer, de continuïteit en discontinuïteit tussen generaties, de leemtes in de kennis, de angst en beklemming na het trauma? En hoe komt het dat visuele media, en fotografie in het bijzonder, zo’n bijzondere rol zijn gaan spelen? ■

Marianne Hirsch

Columbia University, New York
(Vertaling: Anneleen Spiessens)

REDIGNIFICATION

From the Spanish neologism (*redignificación*), redignification means the process by which the victim of a violent crime can overcome this condition and this status in order to attempt regaining control of their own story. Used and theorised in Colombia by anthropologists, sociologists and by psychologists working with victims of the most recent Colombian armed conflicts (1980-2000), redignification is one of the main objectives of the work on memory undertaken at local and national levels, both by the associations of victims, and by public instances and institutions, namely the National Centre of Historical Memory (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica: www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co).

In a context of generalised violence, the violations of fundamental rights and the resulting denial of the person cause a feeling of shame, humiliation and of powerlessness in the face of violence legitimized by the discourses of armed actors. Memory is meant, here, as a process allowing the creation of both an individual and a social identity as a response to this situation. Thus, in Colombia, organizations and institutions reconstruct the historical memory of the conflict and aim to convert it into a means of redignification for the victims. From exercises as well as from group and individual remembrance support (expressing and sharing memories), the victims try to construct coherent discourses that are supposed to allow them to free themselves from what oppresses them by providing a new interpretation of the events.

The process of redignification is supposed to unfold in several steps. The narration of their memories brings about a consciousness of the condition of victim, as well as an understanding of the time span and the causality of the events. From then, the reconstruction of coherent narratives should allow a reinterpretation of past events because of the attribution of new meanings, which should stir a positive feeling of indignation. It is from this feeling that victims are supposed to free themselves from the shame and the guilt in which the acts and speeches of political criminals locked them. They should thus regain the control of their stories, of their lives, and recover a certain amount of self-esteem by affirming themselves as individuals, be able to claim their rights to compensation for damages, and they should better be able to decide their future. Finally, the public expression of memory should bring about the social and political recognition of the pain endured, which ought to theoretically bring closure to the process of redignification. ■

Marie Ines Harté

Facultad de Finanzas, Gobierno
y Relaciones Internacionales – Universidad
Externado de Colombia
(Translation: Sarah Voke)

◆ Bello, Martha Nubia, ‘Identidad, dignidad y desplazamiento forzado. Una lectura psicosocial’, in *Desplazamiento forzado interno en Colombia: Conflicto, Paz y desarrollo*, Bogotá: ACNUR-CODHES, 2001.

◆ Grupo de Memoria Histórica - CNRR, *Memorias en Tiempo de Guerra. Repertorio de iniciativas*, Bogotá, 2009.

◆ Villa, Juan David, ‘La memoria

como territorio en disputa y fuente de poder: un camino hacia la dignificación de las víctimas y la resistencia no violenta’, in ICTJ, *Recordar en conflicto: iniciativas no oficiales de memoria en Colombia*, Bogotá, 2009.

SOLDIER-POET

In most countries at war in 1914-1918, a phenomenon quickly appeared: soldier literature. Depending on the country, its writers were called *écrivains combattants* (France and Belgium), *Frontdichter* (Germany) or *soldier-poet* (United Kingdom). These names refer to writers who, having experienced the front, managed to weave this into literary works and organized themselves to form together an Association of soldier-poets under the aegis of José Germain.

This cultural phenomenon developed due to the mobilization or voluntary engagement of intellectuals in the conflict. Many writers thus found themselves in the armed forces. Few chose to remain silent about an experience that was often felt as paroxysmal. The books they published seemed in this way marked with the stamp of authenticity. Even censored, they responded to the expectations of the public that found in these works an image of the war that was more realistic than in the news reports, often assimilated to “brainwashing”. Supported by critics, editors and literary awards, writers who became soldiers, such as Henri Barbusse, were quickly joined by younger authors, soldiers who became writers. Maurice Genevoix or Ernst Jünger, among others, discovered their vocation in the trenches.

Poetry, journal writing and war narratives were the most widely practiced genres with differences between countries, namely because of literary traditions. War poetry was therefore more present in Germany and in the United Kingdom than it was in France, even if it was not absent altogether. After the conflict, the form of the novel drew more and more heavily on the experience of the war. Indeed, if the publishing phenomenon declined after 1918, there was a notable revival at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s with the publication of war novels gaining considerable success. In Germany alone, 1.2 million copies were sold of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) by Erich Maria Remarque, and the book was translated into more than fifty languages.

The texts of the soldier-poets stirred lively debates relating to their status. There were namely the debates that surrounded the publication of the first critical study of the French corpus, *Témoins* (1929), by Jean Norton Cru, a literature historian and himself a former soldier. According to him, the testimonial function of these texts took precedence over all other functions and it was only in this light that he judged with great severity books on war, paying little attention to the very intentions of the authors. Some of them, namely Roland Dorgelès, retorted sharply, by stressing the literary dimension of their work, which was considered as just as fundamental as a testimony. ■

Nicolas Beaupré

University Blaise Pascal –
CHEC Clermont-Ferrand, IUF
(Translation: Sarah Voke)

◆ Beaupré, Nicolas, *Écrits de la guerre 1914-1918*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2006/2013.

◆ Campa, Laurence, *Poètes de la Grande Guerre: expérience combattante et activité poétique*, Paris: Garnier, 2010.

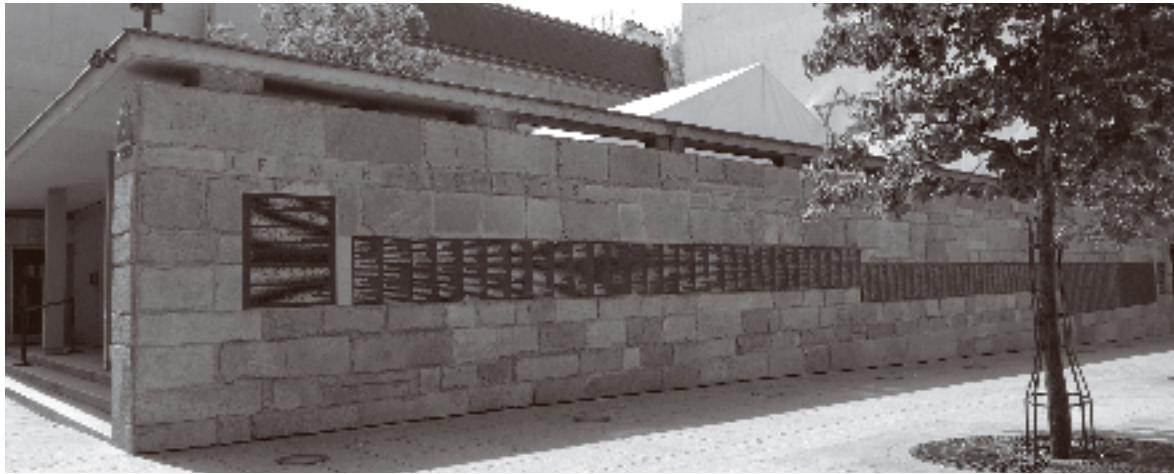
◆ Schoentjes, Pierre, *Fictions de la Grande Guerre*, Paris: Garnier, 2009.

THE RIGHTEOUS

For more than ten years now, the “Righteous of France” regularly receive the highest honours from the State. Considered today as vernacular, the term “Righteous” however only appeared recently within national vocabulary.

On 19 August 1953, in Israel, the members of the Knesset voted for the creation of the Yad Vashem Institute in order to preserve the memory of the martyrs and the heroes of the genocide; borrowing an originally Talmudic expression, they entrusted it with the commemoration of the “Righteous Among the Nations”, “non-Jews who risked their lives to help Jews”. Due to the material difficulties the Yad Vashem met, this mission however went unheeded until the Eichmann trial and the creation of a department dedicated to the Righteous in 1963. Since then, a commission presided by a Supreme Court judge gives a ruling on the basis of two testimonies from Jewish people who considered to have been saved. The nominations were occasions to present a medal and a diploma during an official ceremony led by Israel’s Ministry of Foreign affairs.

Until the mid-1980s, few French people were recognized as



– Wall of the Righteous, inaugurated on 14 June 2006. Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris (2014).

Righteous. From 1985, however, former Jewish Resistant fighters mobilized to make the title known in France. On 1 January 2014, France counted 3,760 Righteous. During the initial period, ceremonies awarding medals were rare and most often organized in a community or an Israeli place, they now take place nearly systematically in town halls and benefit from extensive publicity. The national Assembly celebrated for the first time the saviours in 1995. During his historical speech dating from 16 July, the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, recognized the “Righteous Among the Nations” as new national heroes.

This speech marked the beginning of the progressive recovery of the Israeli honorific category by the French State. On 10 July 2000, the Parliament thus pronounced 16 July as the “Day of commemoration of racist and anti-Semitic crimes committed by the French State and of tribute to the ‘Righteous’ of France”. In January 2007, at

the request of the Foundation for the Remembrance of the Shoah, Jacques Chirac inaugurated a plaque in the crypt of the Pantheon to signify the “Homage of the Nation to the Righteous of France”. The grand ceremony received a political consensus. While widening the Israeli notion in order to include all those who still are, and who shall forever remain, “anonymous”, this commemorative text succeeds in including those who from now are qualified by the term “‘Righteous’ of France” within national historical memory.

These new heroes serve the same rhetorical function as the former Resistant fighters did. Indeed, it is a proven historical fact that three quarters of the Jews present in France in 1940 did not face deportation. The few thousands of Righteous recognized by the Yad Vashem then merely constituted a small part of the saviours, who were a majority within the French population. The second part of this reasoning has but few historiographic foundations. If it is certain that the records established within the

frame of the procedure of awarding the Israeli title only list some of the individuals that indeed helped Jews, there are very few works by historians that explain the reasons for the survival of three quarter of French Jews, and they are most often incomplete and present gaps. Among the hypotheses considered today by researchers, are the relative diversity of the French society, the vastness of the territory and its rural space, the differed occupation of the Southern Zone or furthermore the existence of borders with neutral countries, to only cite a few. Here, as is often the case, memory precedes history. ■

Sarah Gensburger
CNRS/ISP
(Université Paris Ouest Nanterre)
(Translation: Sarah Voke)

♦ Cabanel, Patrick, *Histoire des Justes de France*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2012.

♦ Gensburger, Sarah, *Les Justes de France. Politiques publiques de la mémoire*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2010.

♦ Sémelin, Jacques, *Persécutions et entraides dans la France occupée*, Paris: Seuil, 2013.

THE WRITING OF DISASTER

If the notion of disaster evokes apocalyptic literature as a genre and the tradition of Lamentations (Jeremiah), on the other hand, these references don’t fully pertain to the writing of disaster which, as such, goes back to Maurice Blanchot. This writer particularly developed it in his eponymous collection, composed of fragments, *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980) published seven years after *The Step Not Beyond* thus creating a sort of diptych. Emerging then at this point in time within the intellectual field, this category makes its way into testimonial texts on concentration camps and on the genocide.

Disaster cannot be reduced to viewing events as a cataclysm of History, but to make writing itself a place where disaster manifests itself as such. More than a writing of survivors, disaster is the place where revenants express themselves. A ghostly language that has incorporated the voice of those who disappeared. The writing of the disaster is where the ashes of those who remain without a grave are buried. Testimonial and testamentary literature, testamentary because it is testimonial.

The notion of disaster is a particularly complex movement of thinking, because as is often the case with Blanchot, concepts unfold in paradoxes, or even in aporias. The notion of disaster firstly challenges our representation of time in so far as it includes at the same time what has already taken place and, also, what is most near. Thus, there is neither a precise space, nor a time that can welcome disaster. But the present is the time of the return of disaster, that moment when time itself can come back, but as if pulverized by the disaster. Thus the apocalypse “has always already” occurred even if it is still yet to come.

The writing of disaster stages a true poetic, that privileges the form of the fragment, as Primo Levi already announced in his few words of introduction to *If This Is a Man*. The form of the fragment imitates breaking, debris, bursting, it escapes all desire for chronology, all sense of coming together, it tells the immeasurability of the loss and its reiteration. It deconstructs the very possibility of every narrative. In this regard, the work by Charlotte Delbo is particularly significant. Through her poetic and fragmented writing, she expresses the overwhelming change of

language, wrought with horror, confronted to muteness or to its opposite, as an infinite stammering. To give every disappearance, every ash, a voice at the same time anonymous and singular, this could be the task of the writing of disaster.

It should be mentioned that philosophically, disaster, as inferred by Blanchot, finds its place in its proximity to the concept of passivity as expressed by Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, in that disaster is what escapes all forms of experience. Disaster is pure “subissement” according to the neologism forged by Blanchot, and which refers precisely to a state of inert immobility, detachment and dispossession. ■

Éric Hoppenot
ESPE Paris IV La Sorbonne
(Translation: Sarah Voke)

♦ Celan, Paul, *Choix de poèmes*, translated from the German by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, Paris: Gallimard, 2014.

♦ Delbo, Charlotte, *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, Paris: Minuit, 1970.

♦ Ertel, Rachel, *Dans la langue de personne ? Poésie yiddish de l'anéantissement*, Paris: Seuil, 1993.

♦ Kofman, Sarah, *Paroles suffoquées*, Paris: Galilée, 1987.



Memorial site

DOWNTOWN
MEMORIAL

◆ Berlin. 2007.
Holocaust Memorial
(*Denkmal für die
ermordeten Juden
Europas*).



© Ph. M.

We are used to visiting a museum, going to a memorial, gathering our thoughts beside a monument or simply going to discover it, to look at it out of curiosity. We forget that it is generally placed within a network of other sites and as such contributes to its meaning. A memorial is raised next to a museum; a monument preceded both of these by thirty, sometimes fifty years, and if it is not an artist who adds the final touch to the setting then it is another museum, not far away, that opens its doors. This phenomenon is gaining momentum today. It requires us not to think about these memorial places in isolation from each other, but rather in interaction with each other, and to meditate the very experience

◆ Berlin. 2008. Façade bearing the impact of the April 1945 shootings.

of the journey that leads us there. An experience where our footsteps carry us toward memory, on roads interspersed with other memories, intervals, turnings, forgetting and trivialities, which can at times be quite necessary.

Consider going down to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe at the heart of Berlin. It represents in itself an entity with a dual history. The history of the Nazi crime and the history concerning its memory after the reunification (close to fifteen years of discussion ending in 2005). But we can also raise the question of its location. In order to reach it, one must previously have physically crossed a complex layout of structures, levels and passageways full of history, memory, cultures, and also economic concerns indifferent to the history and to the memory of a city that today still bears on many of its walls the impact of the fights of April 1945. The location of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is set at the crossroads of several paths that come and go between different sites. On one side, the Brandenburg Gate with its neo-classical style dating from the beginning of the 18th century. A bit further, along the forested area of the Tiergarten, the dome of the Reichstag solemnly stands for ●●●

LEARN
MORE

● Perec, Georges & Robert Bober, *Récits d'Ellis Island, histoires d'errance et d'espoir* [Ellis Island, stories of peregrinations and hope], INA, 1979. A book was published simultaneously with the film at Le Sorbier/INA.

● Prazan, Michaël, *Angel Island, l'autre visage du rêve américain* [Angel Island, the other face of the American dream], Arte – Les Films du jour, 2014.

● Sturken, Marita, *Tourist of History. Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma to Ground zero*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007.



© Ph. M.

... the long lines of curious people. On the other side, the Potsdamer Platz emerges like a mirage in the place of the former no mans land that “long ago” separated the East from the West. A business centre has sprung up and vast shopping malls with walls carpeted by screens imitating Time Square have blossomed in its place. Let’s widen the perimeter. We then have the Topography of Terror, the Jewish Museum, and, on the other side, the German Historical Museum, the Bebelplatz where the historical Nazi book burning ceremony took place and now where Micha Ullmann’s installation is situated (the underground “Bibliothek” Memorial – 1995).

I had a similar feeling – this may seem paradoxical, or even odd as both cities are so different – when I headed toward the National 9/11 Memorial in

Manhattan that has recently opened to what is called the “public”, which I am a part of. All of this must be understood *mutatis mutandis*, without any intention of comparing the events these constructions respectively refer to. For several months yet – I am writing these lines in June 2014 –, we will have to make our way there through numerous construction sites. It feels as if we were still at the end of the 1990s at what became not long afterwards the aforementioned Potsdamer Platz. Huge cranes boast above our heads, as large insects which, perched on gigantic wheels, swallow every possible kind of material, some of which have only recently been given a name in order to raise new temples where the memory of the terror (the 9/11 Museum was only to open mid-May) and the power

of business are already and forever near, as the transcendence of capitalism conversely joins the impossibility – naturally transcendent – of measuring the wrong that was suffered.

And us, visitors, take a sinuous route carefully overseen by security guards, policemen and guards making sure as much so that no one gets lost as that the order of our passage, person after person, is carried out conscientiously whilst respecting a precise ritual. Each ticket is verified and ticked, to be verified again up to three or four times. One by one we pass through a turnstile that scans us from head to toe however not dispensing the next guard from asking us – with the simplicity of American politeness which is disconcerting when we come from France – if what we have in the inner pocket of our jacket is in fact our wallet and if, on the other side, there are in fact some pens. Let’s not be mistaken, the role that the security staff is truly fulfilling, is performed perfectly and thus participates in the dramaturgy of the memorial. In addition to this troupe, we also find guides at the disposition of the public, who tell the story for example of a tree that survived the incandescent ashes. They offer advice and inform the public faultlessly. We recognize a similar performance from the guides dressed in Ranger uniforms that welcome us at the Ellis Island Museum (this island, which has become part of our heritage, served between the end of the 19th century and until the middle of the 20th century as a place of examination to either authorize or not entrance to the most needy of immigrants onto American soil).

The Plaza of the Memorial is now open. Paradoxically, the effect is less impressive than what I had expected.



◆ New York. 2014.
9/11 Memorial.

The Memorial’s twin pools, each 4,000 m² in size and supposed to symbolize the base of both towers, would be more aesthetically striking if it were possible *in situ* to adopt the same point of view as the computer generated images offered on the Internet. Thus the subtle position of the fountains, creating a *reflecting absence* effect, does produce the dizzying sensation that the virtual models prepare you for. The concept and its estimations remain above their concrete realization, without exactly realizing them. It is also in this sense that there is a form of transcendence, ...

◆ New York. 2014.
9/11 Memorial.





© Ph. M.

◆ New York. Battery Park. 2014. In front, *The Sphere* by Fritz Koenig (1971, originally *Große Kugelkaryatide*), relocated after the attack on the Twin Towers. Behind and on the right, Mac Adams' Korean War Memorial (1991). In the background, the One World Trade Center.

that the idea cannot coincide with its reality. A gap that certainly responds to the necessity of not managing to control what took place by framing it within the collective geometry of memory.

In Berlin, the route between the steles of the Holocaust monument, none of which are equal in inclination or in size, forbids the visitor from becoming a spectator and from viewing the whole memorial site. In the same way, here in Manhattan, the names of the three thousand victims engraved on the eight edges of the parapets surrounding the pools aren't oppressive and naturally we cannot visually grasp the site in its entirety, even if we have the feeling that it is within reach. If there is a sense of grandeur, it is because the monument is continually uplifted by the visitors, from which emanates, despite the urban bustle, a sense of calm that propels us

to read the names of the deceased, to go toward the tree that survived, to feel the air settle at the foot of the new One World Trade Centre. The structure indeed rises above every skyscraper in New York at 510 meters high and, finally, makes you feel the quiet reflection of the crowd. In this way, the *real* monument is the way in which people occupy the space much more than a perfectly configured site, unless it is precisely designed to humbly withdraw before the commemorative tension created by the presence of those who have gathered for reflection.

Let's make our way out of the 9/11 Memorial and go back to the wider definition of the memorial site as I outlined above. At the tip of Downtown, a triangle is delineated and covers in part, but upside down, the natural triangular shape of Lower Manhattan.

"Ground Zero" as we may have guessed, is the inside tip of the triangle. Before embarking for Ellis Island, you will have to purchase a ticket for the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, the two other tips of this triangle which offer a different reading of the ground we tread upon. Nothing, obviously, in the minds of the organizers, justifies that we should *only* go to Ellis Island, since we are of course curious of the Statue (it is similar to the "unmissable" triangle Krakow, the salt mines of Wieliczka and... Auschwitz). As it is trivially said, one must "go all out" and see them all. This expression, though very unpleasant to the ears, is perhaps not so stupid. In the minds of the agencies, one must not miss anything anymore. The visitor expects to be fully satisfied.

This memory triangle acquires all its significance on the quay at Battery Park, its greenery bordering the Hudson. Waiting to embark for Liberty Island means having patiently walked for at least an hour along the memorial to the American Soldiers who died during the Second World War (eight huge rectangular steles, four on each side, with a victoriously stylized eagle), Fritz Koenig's famous sphere that, after having been severely damaged during the attacks on the Twin Towers, was placed on these very banks, as well as Mac Adams' Korean War Memorial. This makes quite a few in a relatively small space. And if we were to search further, there would be more yet to discover. Thus, without even having placed one foot on the boat that will take us to Ellis Island, memories of war and of terror saturate the few hundred meters where queues of visitors stand waiting. Let's go directly to the island forming the last tip of the triangle, Ellis Island.



© Ph. M.

◆ Ellis Island. 2014.

Ellis Island has become a clean and explanatory museum (which was not the case in Perec & Bober's film), entirely remodelled, presenting all of US history and, at the same time, celebrating it. The guides perform for free, at times with a dramatic and solemn enthusiasm, at other times with an exaggerated burlesque, the same role they would have held a century earlier (I filmed one of them, a real character). Quantities of photos, objects and facsimiles don't manage however to bring closer together the massive walls of the rooms where the immigrants of the old Europe, confined, awaited their destiny. Finally, the most touching room doesn't have anything else to see beside monitors (the placards and relics around the room remain basically unnoticed), in front of which three or four people, from the same family I suppose, sometimes more, are standing trying to find one or a few names on the computerized lists, or on archive documents that have been scanned. Here again, it is individuals – let's call them individuals rather than visitors – that give the site its atmosphere, a glimmer that the scenography is unable to maintain. ■

Philippe Mesnard
(Translation: Sarah Voke)